

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN CHILDREN

- ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE AND CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS •

JULY 2015

A COUNCIL ON ASIAN PACIFIC MINNESOTANS REPORT

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### ACRONYMS

ECE – Early Childhood Education.  
FFN – Family, friend, and neighbor child care, also known as informal care, home-based care, and relative care

SEA – Southeast Asian.

Principal Investigator: Angelina Nguyen, Research Director



## Executive Summary

### KEY FINDINGS

#### What early learning<sup>1</sup> opportunities do children have?

- 66% of children age four and under are cared for solely by a family member, including parent, grandparent, or other relative over the age of 16.
- 18% are cared for by a paid but unlicensed provider in their own home or someone else's home.
- 11% are enrolled in Head Start, a childcare center, nursery, pre-school, pre-kindergarten, or licensed family child care.

#### What do caretakers believe about early childhood development?

Caretakers want their children to learn and retain their community's language *and* English, but they find it more difficult to teach their children the community's language and easier to teach English.

85% of caretakers believe it is "very important" for children who are growing up in this country to speak and understand their cultural community's language.



85% Very important

More than 75% of caretakers indicated that it is "very hard" or "somewhat hard" for them to teach their children **their community's language**.



\*survey of 414 respondents

More than 76% of caretakers reported that it is "somewhat easy" or "very easy" for their family to teach their children English.



\*survey of 400 respondents

#### What factors promote or hinder children's early learning?

Cost of quality early learning is too high. Southeast Asian (SEA) families are not eligible for childcare assistance but yet cannot afford to pay out of pocket, especially for more than one child and/or full-time care.

The average SEA family surveyed **spends 18% of their annual income on childcare**:



This exceeds the affordability criterion of 10% set by the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

#### FOOTNOTE

1. Early learning applies to children age four and under.

## Policy Recommendations

**Promote bicultural and bilingual early learning opportunities in licensed pre-K programs that are respectful and cognizant of the realities of SEA families.** The majority of families prefer that their children learn and retain their community's native language and culture. They believe this is important for the preservation of cultural practices, beliefs, and history. Currently, SEA families do not have confidence in the ability of the existing programs to achieve a very challenging bicultural goal. To maximize pre-K readiness for SEA children, SEA parents have to be convinced that a structured licensed pre-K program will complement the traditional friends, family, and neighbor system and support linguistic and cultural goals parents have for their children.



**Ensure access to affordable and quality early childhood education for all children.** The cost of quality early learning is too high; because of this the majority of families do not enroll their children in center-based pre-K programs. The majority of SEA families in our sample are not eligible for early learning assistance, but do not make enough to pay the market rate for existing programs. To ensure kindergarten readiness for all Minnesotan children, including SEA children, early learning opportunities should be made accessible to all families regardless of income.

**Disaggregate data to track by ethnic community.** Within the Asian population there is great diversity among different ethnic groups; therefore, it is necessary to track data by ethnicity to understand each community's needs.



## Introduction

This report focuses on SEA children age four and under from the Hmong, Karen, Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese ethnic groups in Minnesota. We hope that the data in this report will help improve the discussion about policy options for our communities, by providing a grounding in the realities of birth to kindergarten life for our families and children. With this objective, the research questions guiding this investigation are:

1. What early learning opportunities do SEA children have?
2. What do SEA caretakers believe about early childhood development?
3. What factors promote or hinder SEA children's early learning?

This study, intended as a starting point for gathering significant data on how our SEA community operates, will offer insights into the cultural and financial determinants of SEA parent decisions about their children's early learning opportunities. We intend to use this information to provide policy support to the legislature and to the Governor's Office in order to improve education for all members of Minnesota's Asian Pacific community.

## Why Southeast Asian Minnesotans?

First, according to the 2010 United States Census, Minnesota's Asian population was 214,234, a 51% increase since 2000. The Asian population is projected to be the fastest growing in the state over the next 30 years, becoming an increasingly significant portion of the taxpaying workforce needed to support a retiring baby boomer generation. The five ethnic groups in this report – the Karen, Hmong, Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian – comprise about half of the Minnesotan Asian population at a cumulative population of 112,078.<sup>2</sup>

Second, aggregated data usually hides wide discrepancies between different ethnic groups and misrepresents significant nuances among them. According to a report published by the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice (2012), "Cambodian, Hmong, and Vietnamese American children between the ages of 3 and 4 in Minnesota are less likely than whites to be enrolled in preschool. In contrast, almost 70% of Chinese American children of the same age attend preschool."<sup>3</sup>

FOOTNOTE  
2. Refer to Appendix on page 26.

3. Asian American Center for Advancing Justice. (2012). *A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the Midwest*. Washington, D.C.

## Methodology and Data Sources

We used mixed methods to answer our research questions: cross-sectional (one-time) community survey, focus groups, and individual interviews with parents and primary caretakers of SEA children under five years old. Questionnaires used were designed to collect complementary data from all three methods.

The survey questionnaire was designed to collect data on logistics and demographics of the target population, such as household income, commute time, and childcare arrangement. Some survey questionnaire items asked respondents to select from a given list to indicate their values and preferences, such as activities and traits of a care provider that are most important to them. The survey tool was intended to collect data statewide.

The focus group and individual interview questionnaire was designed to collect data about participants' beliefs, values, knowledge, and preferences regarding childcare. The questionnaire items were open-ended. Due to the conversational nature of focus groups and interviews, and the concentration of SEA families in the Twin Cities metro area, all focus groups and interviews were conducted in the metro area.

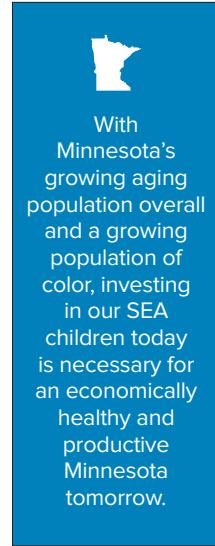
The survey, focus group, and individual interviews were disseminated simultaneously. Eligible participants were asked to participate in both the survey and focus group at community outreach events. Eleven participants participated in both.

### Survey

A 60-question survey was disseminated using a purposive, non-probability sampling strategy. Outreach activities were conducted at community events in the summer of 2014, on Facebook and the Council's website, and by word of mouth among community members. A total of 425 eligible households participated in the survey. Most respondents self-selected to take the survey online in English; twelve respondents opted to take the survey over the phone in their native language. (Table 1)

### Focus Groups

The following focus groups were conducted with parents of eligible children: two focus groups with Hmong parents, two focus groups with Lao parents, one focus group with



FOOTNOTE  
3. Asian American Center for Advancing Justice. (2012). *A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the Midwest*. Washington, D.C.

Table 1

Ethnicity of Survey Participants <sup>4</sup>	N	%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>425</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
Hmong	257	60.5%
Vietnamese	81	19.1%
Cambodian	49	11.5%
Lao	46	10.8%
Karen	20	4.7%

Table 2

Ethnicity of Focus Group Participants <sup>5</sup>	N	%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
Karen	18	43.9%
Lao	15	36.6%
Hmong	6	14.6%
Vietnamese	2	4.9%
Cambodian	0 <sup>6</sup>	0.0%

Table 3

Ethnicity of Interview Participants <sup>7</sup>	N	%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
Vietnamese	6	85.7%
Cambodian	1 <sup>8</sup>	14.3%
Karen	0	0.0%
Lao	0	0.0%
Hmong	0	0.0%

ranked. Survey data were analyzed to examine trends.<sup>9</sup>

Vietnamese parents, and three focus groups with Karen parents. A structured interview questionnaire guided the focus group discussions. Most focus group discussions were conducted in the participants' preferred language, which was English, with the exception of the Karen. For Karen participants, each focus group was done in Karen with an interpreter. Focus group participants filled out a paper questionnaire in English that captured basic demographic information. This information was used to contextualize participants' remarks during focus group discussions and data analysis. Karen interpreters helped Karen focus group participants fill out the questionnaire. (Table 2)

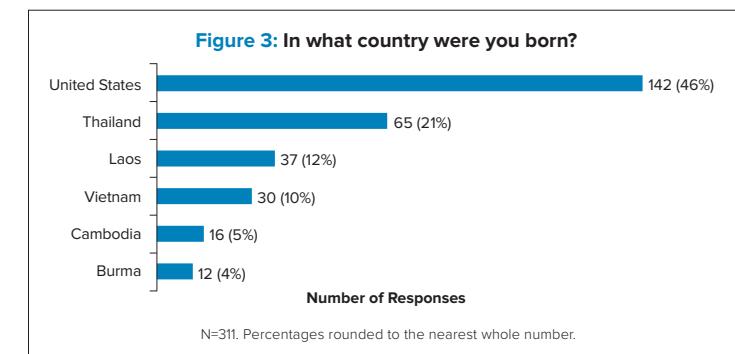
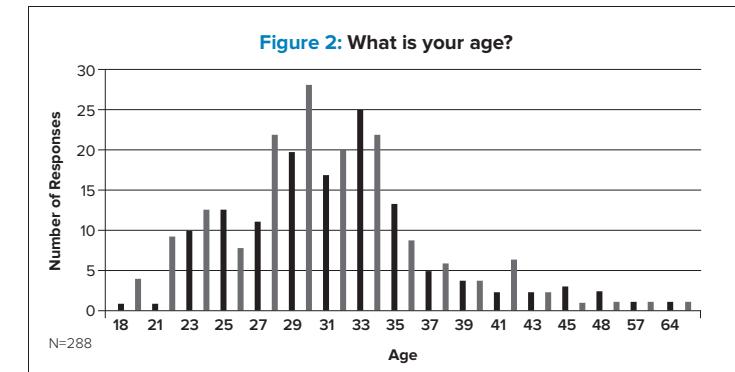
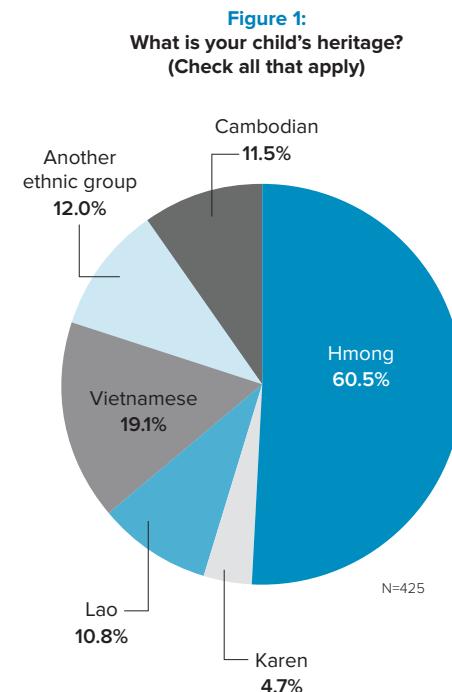
### Individual Interviews

In order to include families who could not participate in a focus group, individual interviews using the same questionnaire were implemented over the phone and in-person. Except for one interview conducted in Vietnamese, all interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language, which was English. Interview participants filled out a paper questionnaire in English that captured basic demographic information, which was used to contextualize interviewees' remarks during the interview and data analysis. (Table 3)

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected from the focus groups and interviews with parents were analyzed using content analysis to identify themes that shed light on factors that influence SEA children's early learning opportunities, parents' perspectives and preferences about their children's early education, and common challenges their families face. The number of references to each theme was recorded and

## SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



### FOOTNOTES

4. Reported ethnicity of survey participants are those of the eligible children under five years old. Eligible children can have complete or partial heritage in one or more of the targeted Southeast Asian ethnicities. N is the number of families who participated in the survey.

5. Reported ethnicity of focus group participants are those of the parents of eligible children under five years old. N is the number of families who participated in the focus group.

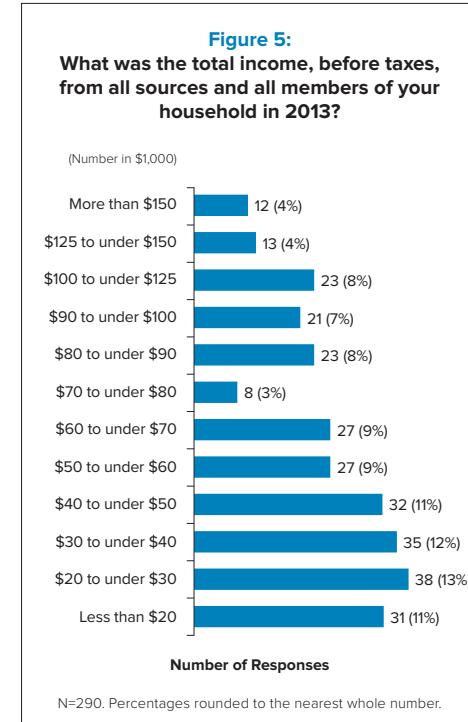
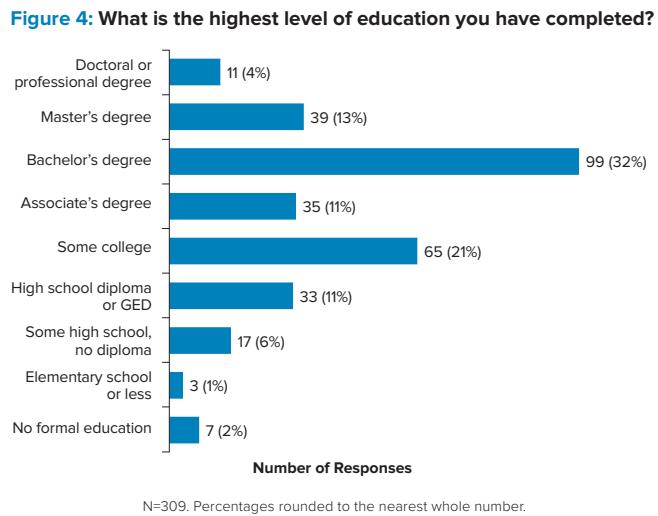
6. For a discussion of Cambodian participation in focus groups and interviews, see Study Limitations section of the report.

7. Reported ethnicity of interview participants are those of the parents of eligible children under five years old. N is the number of families who participated in the interview.

8. For a discussion of Cambodian participation in focus groups and interviews, see Study Limitations section of the report.

9. To view focus group, interview, and survey data, see Data Book online at mn.gov/capm

## SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



## Findings

### FINDINGS: WHAT EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES DO SEA CHILDREN HAVE?

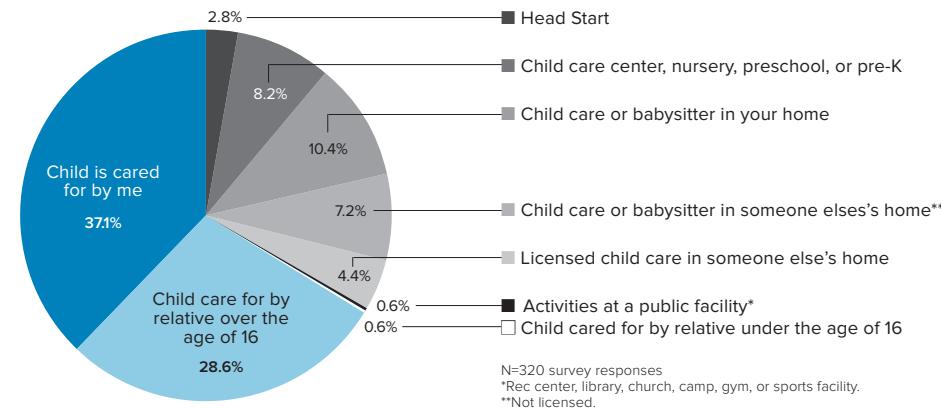
#### Common Childcare and Preschool Arrangements

Survey respondents reported “child cared for by me” and “child cared for by relative over the age of 16” as the two most frequently used child care arrangements. In contrast, only 8% reported using “child care center, nursery, preschool, or pre-K.” (Figure 6)

#### Family, Friends, and Neighbors (FFN)

In alignment with survey results, two-thirds of focus group and interview participants rely on personal relationships, including family, friends, and neighbors. Many SEA children stay home with grandparents, especially grandmothers, for reasons such as trust, convenience, availability, low cost, and exposure to their native culture and language. The grandmother is the preferred caretaker for families if she is nearby, healthy, and available. Even in cases

**Figure 6: Which of the following child care arrangements for your youngest child have you used MOST OFTEN in the last two weeks?**



of concerns about a grandmother's caregiving style or limited ability to help the child prepare for school, families still prefer the grandmother as caretaker.

*"For me, I'm just lucky to have grandma around, so both of my boys... stay with grandma."*  
— Lao mother.

If the grandmother is not available, some focus group parents reported intentionally working alternating shifts in order to care for their children.

*"We work different hours just to accommodate each other so that we don't have to put him in daycare."* — Lao father, in reference to himself and his wife.

Some mothers in focus group discussions reported choosing to be stay-at-home moms, especially if they have more than one child. Participants who have less education and/or experience difficulty in a competitive job market were more likely to be stay-at-home

parents because the cost of child care exceeds their earning potential. This was common among mothers who participated in focus group discussions.

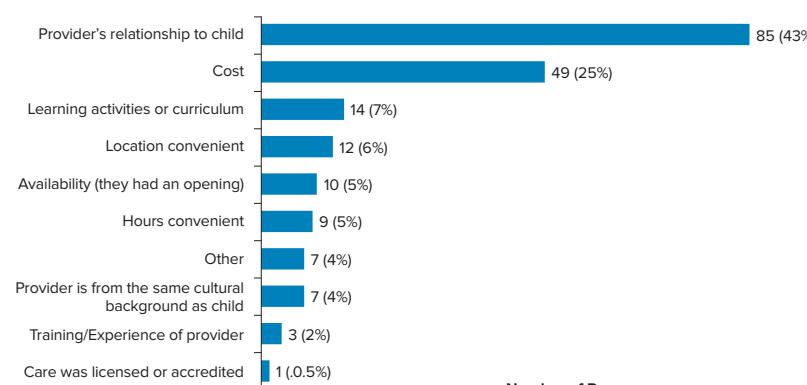
*"Ever since I had my second child, I've been a stay-at-home mom."* — Lao mother.

Friends, and to a lesser degree, neighbors are used as back-up arrangements to care for children during transition periods, such as after preschool but before a parent gets home from work. This secondary arrangement was common with families where both parents work full-time and/or odd hours and the grandparents are not nearby.

*"If my wife and I aren't home, then we send him to our family friend's house to be watched for 2 hours."* — Vietnamese father.

Survey findings indicate that the top two reasons why families choose FFN are "provider's relationship to child" and "cost," while the two least selected reasons are "training/experience of provider" and "care was licensed or accredited." (Figure 7)

**Figure 7: Why did you choose this childcare arrangement for your youngest child over other possibilities? In other words, what was the most important thing you considered?**



N=197. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

**Table 4: How often do you do the following activities with your child?**

ACTIVITY	Every day	Most days, 3x-6x per week	Some days, 1x-2x per week	Not at all	N
Have your child play with toys or games or other play materials, including everyday household items that they play with in general	54.6%	23.6%	13.8%	8.0%	326
Talk to or tell stories to your child in English	48.9%	26.6%	14.4%	10.1%	327
Sing songs with your child in English	46.3%	29.6%	17.4%	6.7%	328
Get your child together with other children from child's cultural community or communities to play	10.6%	22.2%	40.7%	26.4%	329
Read to your child in language(s) from child's cultural community or communities	8.2%	14.8%	29.9%	47.1%	331
Have your child read along with you or help them tell stories themselves in language(s) from child's cultural community or communities	8.2%	13.9%	24.5%	53.3%	330

*"I think just [my wife and me] teaching him at home is almost [as] valuable as... putting him in daycare," and therefore center-based care is not worth the high cost.*

In focus group discussions, the most commonly cited benefit of this FFN arrangement was low cost. Parents consistently stated that they believe they can provide equal or better quality care and school preparation at home at a lower cost than center-based care. Some parents shared their belief that not all center-based care is high quality and can effectively prepare their children for kindergarten.

Survey results indicate that parents want to conduct activities at home that promote their child's learning and school readiness in both English and their community's language. However, SEA children have fewer opportunities to learn in their native language. As indicated in Table 4, the three activities parents surveyed do most frequently with their child are done in English, whereas the three activities done least frequently are in their community's language.

#### FINDINGS: WHAT DO SEA CARETAKERS BELIEVE ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

All parents in this study indicated that they value education and want their children to be educated. As such, they are willing to invest time and money to ensure their children's academic success where they deem appropriate.

##### **Formal Education**

Most survey participants reported that formal education should start early. It is worth noting that 86% of caretakers believe that a child should begin formal education by age three. (Figure 8)

##### **Part-time at Home, Part-time in School<sup>10</sup>**

Focus group participants describe an ideal childcare arrangement as part-time at a center and part-time with family members. Such an arrangement allows a child to simultaneously prepare for school and bond with family members, learn their community's language, and acquire their community's cultural values and morals.

*"I just love staying home with my son. I don't let anyone or anything talk me out of it. I think it's really important, especially at this age. But I also want him to be out there...in school...so he can get a chance to...learn." – Lao mother.*

This part-time care arrangement has two practical benefits for focus group parents. First, children are able to learn their native language and culture at home. Secondly, part-time center-based care is more affordable than full-time care for the average SEA family.

*As one parent said, "...I think affordable cost would be in the range of \$25-30/day. But a lot [of] places are charging...about twice as what most people can afford, so we're forced to do half-day, half-week, or part-time." – Lao mother.*

However, parents who work full-time do not have the job flexibility needed to accommodate mid-day transportation and personally provide half-day care for their children. This is why childcare oftentimes falls on grandmothers. Often, however, grandparents are not trained to prepare children for kindergarten in the United States. A result of this is that part of the kindergarten preparation is lacking for these children.

In many cases, part-time at home care was arranged given the limited culturally and linguistically appropriate formal care and its high cost. Parents stressed the advantages of teaching culture and language at home. Some parents, however, also see that there are advantages to being in a licensed pre-K program; specifically, opportunities to socialize and engage in school readiness activities. This suggests a tension between these two options with many families choosing to keep their children at home, rather than enrolling them in existing formal programs.

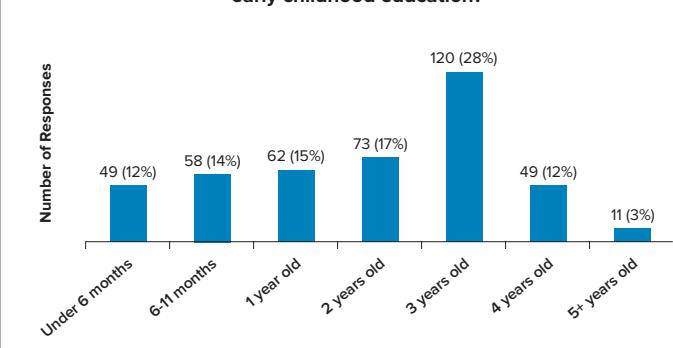
##### **Culture and Language**

***Native Language Acquisition and Retention***  
A majority of families surveyed (85%) believe it is very important that their children learn and retain their community's native language. Proficiency in this language is nearly as important as proficiency in English. (Figure 9 and 10). SEA children have mirrored the experience

##### FOOTNOTE

10. Mainstream research shows that full-time early education is more beneficial for children than part-time education. (Reynolds, A.J., Richardson, B.A., Hayakawa, M., Lease, E.M., Warner-Richter, M., Englund, M.M., ...Sullivan, M. (2014). Association of a full-day vs part-day preschool intervention with school readiness, attendance, and parent involvement. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 312(20), 2126-2134. doi:10.1001/jama.2014.15376). However, for our cultural communities, native language and culture exposure is important to parents. Given the lack of bilingual programs and the cost of full-time center-based care, part-time at home gives SEA children language and culture exposure.

**Figure 8: At what age should a child begin to receive formal early childhood education?**



N=422. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

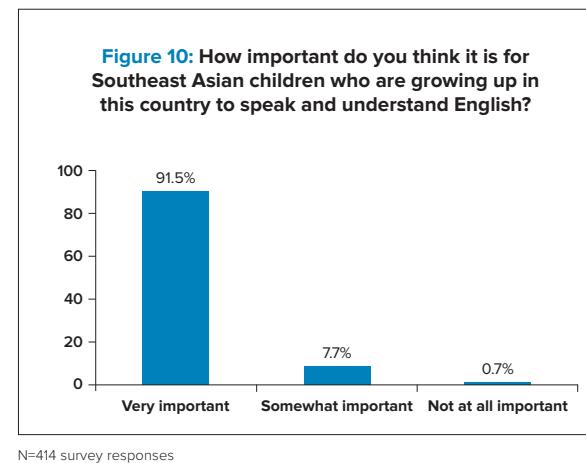
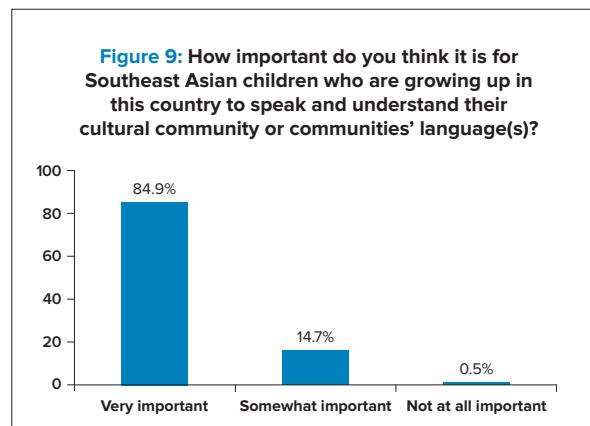
of previous immigrant groups in that native language retention over generations is extremely difficult.

With the exception of the Karen, 77% of focus group participants are either United States-born or came to the United States as infants and toddlers. These parents find it difficult to pass on their native culture and language to their children because they themselves are not fluent in their native language. Despite limited proficiency in their native language, parents prefer that their children grow up bilingual and comfortable navigating their community's culture.

*"We have this pride that we want our child to know their own tongue." – Hmong father.*

*"They can stay with grandma and learn the language. That's the most important thing for me because I know that when they grow older it's going to be much harder to teach them that. I want to instill that in them while they're younger." – Lao mother.*

*"English will always come because we live in the U.S....But to maintain Vietnamese language and culture is very important so I would prefer that very much. That's why I don't mind so much that most of the activities and the caretaking is from the grandparents because they're the*



*best source, obviously, for maintaining that culture and language."*  
–Vietnamese mother.

Teaching children their community's native language is difficult for parents for many reasons. First, the parents' proficiency in their community's language is limited.

*A Hmong father shared, "I can speak Hmong, but I can't read or write it. It's difficult for me to teach my kids."*

Nearly all focus group parents who grew up in the United States share this difficulty.

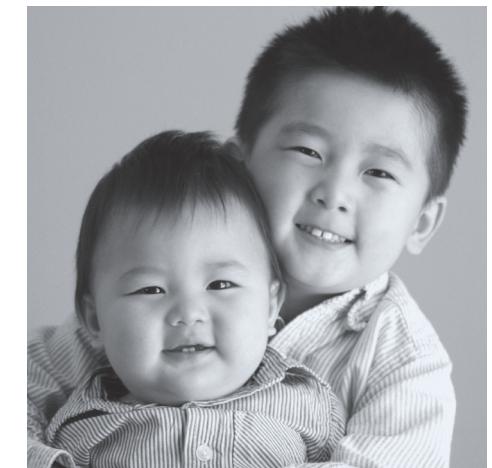
Second, sometimes children resist learning their community's language because it is not used on a regular basis or consistently supported. Consequently, parents feel they must demonstrate the relevance of their community's language with regular usage in order for their children to retain it.

*One Vietnamese mother expressed concern that her 2-years-old daughter would someday ask her, "Is it a dead language, mommy? I mean, it's no use to me. Why do you force it?"*

This mother went on to say, "I also ask of my elders to...speak to her in Vietnamese, so that way she can continue to practice and learn."

Third, opportunities for children to practice speaking their community's language are intermittent and available only if and when they spend time with grandparents, at a language class, or at a traditional ceremony or community gathering. Given that **immersion is the most effective way to learn and retain a language**, SEA children are less likely to learn and retain their community's language because they lack immersion opportunities.

*A Vietnamese mother echoed this challenge: "They don't [speak Vietnamese at daycare]. That's why I send them to Vietnamese church on Sunday to learn Vietnamese. But it doesn't help that much. Nowadays, all the teachers speak English to the kids too."*



*"I believe it's an investment for our kids, for their generation. It's definitely worth retaining a language."*

Yet, parents continue to work hard to provide opportunities for their children to learn their community's language. As one Vietnamese father admitted, there were times when it was financially difficult to pay for a nanny to teach his children Vietnamese, "But I feel that it's an investment. I believe it's an investment for our kids, for their generation. It's definitely worth retaining a language."

#### ***Added Challenge: Slower Language Development for Bilingual Learners***

During focus groups, about one-fourth of parents of bilingual and bicultural children expressed concern over slower language development observed in their children. Research show that children who grow up bilingual and bicultural develop communication skills at a slower pace during their early years as they juggle multiple languages and discover the appropriate context to use each language, and eventually they catch up.<sup>11</sup> Parents who recognize that this is a normal course of development foster their children's bilingual upbringing, but parents who do not recognize this frequently encourage learning English over their community's language.

*A Lao mother observed with her 4-year-old son, "Every time I teach them an English word or point something out, I say it in both languages... I'm so amazed even to this day how quickly kids learn and understand everything. But as far as speaking, it just takes him a little longer because he has to think about what language he should speak in."*

*A Vietnamese mother who observed another child who is fluent in three languages understood this developmental process: "Yes, your child is slow to pick up a language and they are slow to form a cohesive sentence but it does not mean they're not working up here [pointing to her head]. It's just a matter of when."*

On the other hand, other parents focus on only English:

*A Hmong mother, nervous about her child's slow speech development said, "I just think that [Hmong] is something they can learn right now too, but they can learn that when they're a little bit older. Right now, if I try to teach them Hmong all the time [then] when they get to school, [they] get confused."*

FOOTNOTES  
11. Nicoladis, E., & Genesee, F. (1997). Language development in preschool bilingual children. *Journal of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology*, 21(4), 258-270.

12. The definition of "childcare provider" includes relatives and family members. Survey respondents were asked to rate how important each activity is to the overall quality of a childcare/preschool program or arrangement.

13. N = number of valid survey responses per question.

*A Vietnamese mother who raised her child similarly shared, "With my first [child],...with two languages, it confused her. It slowed her speech down a little bit so I decided we [were] going to talk English with her so she doesn't get confused. I thought...as she got older, she'd catch up. But now, [she doesn't] want to speak Vietnamese at all."*

Despite setbacks during the learning process, most parents believe that bilingualism is beneficial for their children's long-term success.

*A Hmong mother reported frequently telling her children, "If you know two languages, it'll be better to help you get a job. And people will want you because you have something special that nobody else has."*

*A Vietnamese father expressed the same belief, "Kids who know multiple languages have better skills."*

#### **Highly-Valued Qualities**

When selecting childcare and preschool arrangement, SEA families repeatedly stressed the top three qualities they seek: school readiness, social development, and trust. (Table 5).

#### **School Readiness**

In focus groups and interviews, parents shared that they want childcare providers to expose their children to a range of activities and knowledge areas, including numbers, letters, language, music, creative arts, educational games, physical exercise, and field trips.

**Table 5: How important is it that the childcare provider do the following to care for your child(ren)?<sup>12</sup>**

ACTIVITY	Extremely important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important	N <sup>13</sup>
Promote children's social and emotional development?	86.9%	12.6%	0.5%	0.0%	373
Help prepare your child(ren) for school?	81.0%	17.4%	1.1%	0.5%	379
Have special training in taking care of children?	74.9%	22.3%	2.2%	0.5%	367
Are referred to you by someone you trust?	71.5%	24.1%	3.3%	1.1%	361

*A Vietnamese mother described her ideal care provider as a place with, “...more teachers..., activities, [and that] challenge[s] their brain.”*

Some focus group and interview participants, especially those who are not fluent in English, believe that a provider must ensure the child has a strong command of the English language.

*A Vietnamese father said about his sons, “When they start kindergarten they’ve had preschool, then... they absorb and adapt faster [because they understand English]. These guys [because] they start early in preschool, they don’t have to take English as a Second Language.”*

Other participants prefer that a provider offer an individualized learning plan for each child, especially if the child has a learning disability. The majority of participants believe providers should adjust the intensity and length of their program as appropriate for the age of the child.

*“Their attention span and ability to retain...they need some sort of structure [that’s] repetitive enough but not too much where they get bored with it [that] is ideal.” – Lao mother.*

#### **Social Development**

In focus groups and interviews, parents describe a healthy environment as one that encourages the child to develop a sense of self, negotiate with others, develop emotional intelligence, learn respect, and embrace diversity.

Parents see social development as essential for school and life success. One Vietnamese mother described her expectation of an early learning provider:

*“I need my child to be able to be sociable, how do you introduce yourself to a group, how do you play well with a group, and if you get in trouble, how do you resolve conflict. That kind of skill is important because that’s going to help nurture the child when she transitions to school and transitions to life.”*

Social development is especially important for children who are bicultural and living in communities with a diverse population. A Vietnamese mother summed up this belief, “Hopefully when they’re exposed with the diversity they aren’t scared and they’re not

**“Hopefully when they’re exposed with the diversity they aren’t scared and they’re not ignorant, and that in itself might encourage them to keep their culture or language without feeling singled out or disrespected.”**

ignorant, and that in itself might encourage them to keep their culture or language without feeling singled out or disrespected.”

#### **Trust in the Provider**

Trust in a provider, whether it is FFN or a licensed center, is a necessity. In many cases, trust is a more important factor than the formal licensure and qualifications of a provider.

*A Hmong mother who prefers to have her 2-year-old daughter cared for by the child’s grandmother said, “I don’t trust daycare, so that’s the reason why I don’t put my daughter in daycare.”*

According to the parents, there is no substitute for the unconditional love a child receives from family members. Parents trust providers who they believe have unconditional love for their child.

*A Hmong father explained, “I think for me, knowing that my mom is watching my baby; I give complete trust to her... To me, this is my mom who raised me, so she’s going to show my child the unconditional love that she showed me.”*

*In practice, that unconditional love manifests in the form of physical care, best described by a Hmong mother who said, “I know that they’ll be safe, they’ll be fed, they’ll be clean, all that.”*

Parents trust recommendations made by people they know in their community more than a public rating system, even if that rating system is verified by the government.

*“Word of mouth is a personal reference, so you trust that person well enough.” – Lao father.*

*“[A rating] is just a statistic, numbers and stuff but not personal.” – Lao mother.*





## FINDINGS: WHAT FACTORS PROMOTE OR HINDER SEA CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING?

### Affordability

Cost is the number one barrier to accessing quality early learning for SEA focus group and interview participants. Because of the high cost of formal early education and center-based childcare, many families chose FFN care.

The average annual income of families surveyed is \$54,600, while the average expenditure on childcare per week is \$193.10, which means that these families spend on average 18% of

**Table 6:** How much did your household pay (or will pay) for last week, Monday through Sunday, for all of your child care expenses, for all of your children age 4 and younger?

	Cambodian	Hmong	Karen	Lao	Vietnamese	Another race/ethnicity	Total
Mean	\$198.84	\$178.83	\$27.00	\$175.99	\$293.16	\$251.92	\$193.10
Median	\$200.00	\$120.00	\$0.00	\$107.95	\$200.00	\$100.00	\$125.00
Min	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Max	\$420.00	\$1200.00	\$250.00	\$500.00	\$3000.00	\$3000.00	\$3000.00
N	19	93	10	14	31	27	154

**Table 7:** Do you receive any of the following sources of support to help cover the cost of childcare for your youngest child? (Check all that apply).

SUPPORT	N	%
Government (federal, state, or local government agency or welfare office)	41	12.9%
Child's other parent (not in same household)	7	2.2%
Employer	25	7.8%
Other	7	2.2%
None of the above	244	76.5%
TOTAL	319	100.0%

### FOOTNOTE

14. Set by the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

their income on child care. This proportion exceeds the average Minnesotan family's by nearly 3% and the United States Health and Human Services' guideline by 8% (the affordability guideline states that no more than 10% of total household income should be spent on child care<sup>14</sup>). Even for a family of four with more than \$100,000 in annual income, child care cost is still expensive.

*One Vietnamese mother of two children discussed the high cost of child care: "They cost so much nowadays...not a lot of people can afford that. Right now, both of them go to summer Kidstop. I pay \$175 per week for each one of them. It's outrageous..."*

### Specific Challenges of a New Community: the Karen

In focus group discussions, Karen parents stressed that they want their children to go to school and succeed.

When asked about educational activities with children, almost all parents said they rely on their older children or computer games to teach their toddlers. For example, one Karen parent whose son attends Head Start everyday described his activities at home:

*"When he gets home, he watches TV – TPT and cartoon programs. He also plays with his sister."*

When asked to rank their needs, the top three answers were health, housing, and basic knowledge to navigate everyday life. Three out of 18 families that participated in the focus groups have an annual income between \$15,000 and \$25,000, while the other 15 families have an annual income of less than \$15,000. Seven families listed household expenses and food as one of their top 3 concerns.

With such difficulties related to basic needs, their children's education, especially early childhood education, is not one of the Karen parents' top concerns.

*According to a Karen mother who said she was unable to help her children because she was struggling, "When it comes to education, my children are on their own."*

***"When it comes to education, my children are on their own."***



## Limitations & Further Research

### LIMITATIONS

The data presented in this report is collected from a convenience sample; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Southeast Asian Minnesotan population. It is almost impossible to find a sampling frame, and consequently deploy a random sampling strategy, due to the population size, geographic dispersion, language barrier, and other factors that make it difficult to engage with SEA communities.

We focused our efforts on collecting the biggest sample size given time and staff capacity limitations. We acknowledge the limited sample size from which data is drawn for this report, both the survey and focus groups.

Our sample may be skewed towards participants with medium-high household income. It is challenging to reach lower income households for many reasons. Since we used a convenience sample, it is possible that we omitted lower income households and therefore did not collect data that may shed light on important disparities even within ethnic communities.

Our focus group sample size by ethnicity is not representative of each ethnic group's population share. Specifically, we encountered difficulties when recruiting Cambodian participants for focus group interviews. Only one Cambodian parent participated in a phone interview, from which data provides in-depth insights rather than representation of all Cambodian parents in Minnesota. Similarly, our survey sample size, when disaggregated by ethnic groups, presents a small, non-representative number of respondents. For any given survey question, the maximum numbers of respondents are 33 Cambodian, 214 Hmong, 15 Karen, 32 Lao, 57 Vietnamese, and 46 of another race or ethnic group.

As it relates to the Karen participants, there may be possible errors in the data collection process due to translation inaccuracies, misunderstanding, and/or misreading of the survey or focus group questions.

### FURTHER RESEARCH

We hope this report will serve as a catalyst for additional research that contributes to the ongoing policy conversation and helps stakeholders move towards action on providing equal access to early learning opportunities for multi-lingual and multi-cultural children in Minnesota.

Questions worthy of further investigation include:

1. How appropriate is the current income eligibility guideline for child care assistance and early education programs in capturing the challenges of modern-day families, especially families from cultural communities such as the SEA?
2. It is true that enrollment in quality early learning program is one effective method to prepare a child for kindergarten, but is it the only method? Similar learning stimuli may be replicated in many different environments.

### Conclusion

Minnesota is home to some of the largest concentrations of SEA families in the United States. Southeast Asian families' refugee background poses a different socio-economic context than their Asian counterparts and mainstream Minnesotans. Currently, their unique circumstance and needs are not reflected in aggregated data that clump all Asians together. As a community matures in America, its needs often change as well. This report is the first step to identifying those needs as they relate to early childhood education. The findings point to a new policy course, one that promotes bilingual education, which the state of Minnesota is only beginning to recognize.

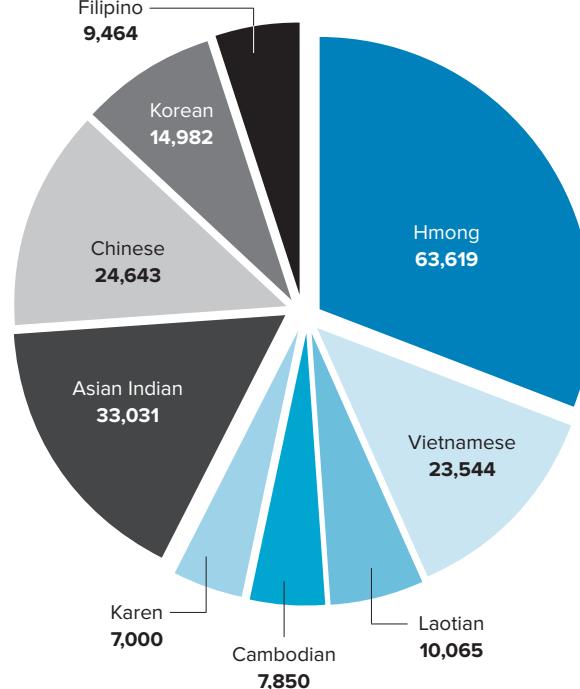


## Appendix

### A CLOSER LOOK AT SEA COMMUNITIES

**Figure 1: Largest Asian Populations in Minnesota, 2010**

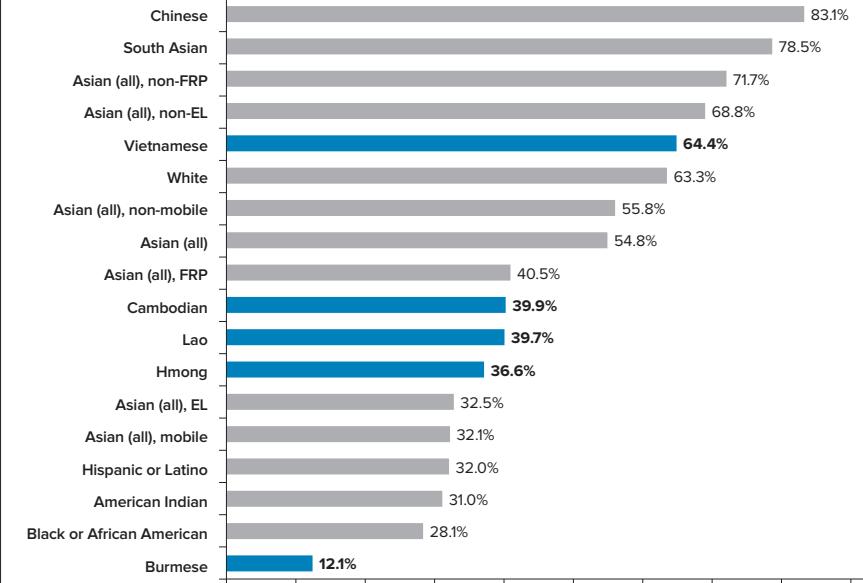
Total Asian population in Minnesota: 214,234



Source: United States Census Bureau, 2008-2010 American Community Survey

Minnesota has one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation. The difference in school performance among different Asian ethnic groups is most obvious in older students who take the MCA tests. SEA students such as Burmese, Hmong, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese are proficient at a much lower percentage even though as a racial group, all Asian students show proficiency at a higher rate than White students.

**Figure 2: Students Proficient in MCA and III Math, 2011**

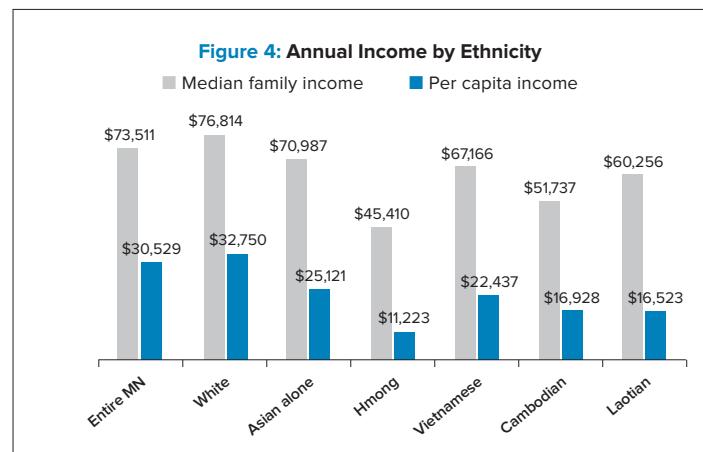
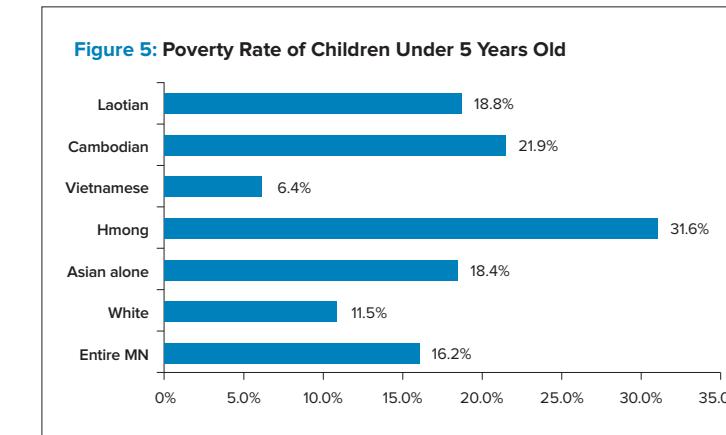
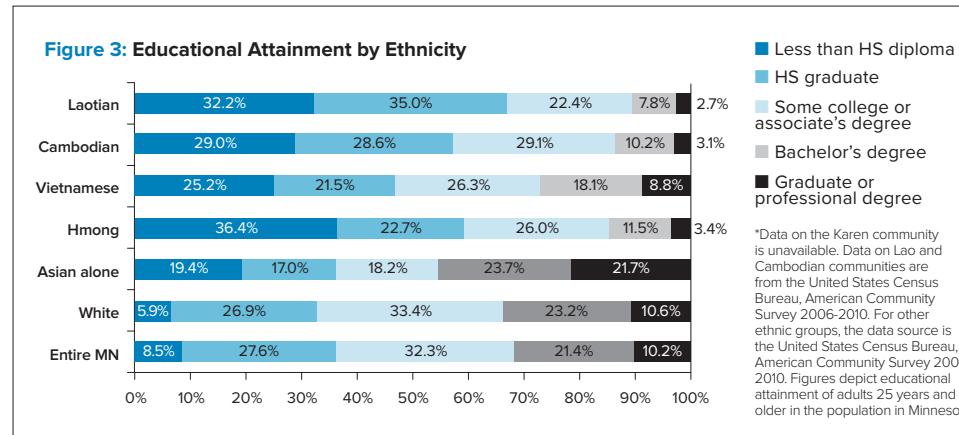


Source: Minnesota Department of Education, 2011.

\***Free and reduced priced (FRP)** lunch status refers to students eligible for the Free or Reduced Price Meal Program at school. A child's family income must fall below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level to qualify for reduced-cost meals, or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level to qualify for free meals. However, not all FRP eligible students are enrolled in the program. FRP is often used as a proxy for student poverty.

\*\* **English Learner (EL)** refers to students who are currently receiving English Learning services. However, not all eligible students are enrolled in EL services. (EL was previously referred to as English Language Learner or English as a Second Language.)

A similar trend is observed in educational attainment of SEA adults age 25 or older (refer to Figure 3). In this way, we are a community of contrasts. Such contrast is also present in our Asian community's median annual household income (refer to Figure 4).



## PLANT THE SEED: THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Many studies on early childhood education have established a strong link between early learning, K-12 school performance, higher educational attainment, and lifetime income. A child's brain develops up to 90% of its capacity in the first three years of life. Quality early learning – or lack thereof – sets the stage for success – or struggle – later in life. A newly published study found that children who attended a full-day, high-quality preschool program were more prepared for kindergarten than those who attended the same program part-time.<sup>15</sup> The advantage gave full-time attendees a 4- to 5-month head start and was especially clear in socio-emotional development and language acquisition. More time in a quality learning environment equals more benefit.



### THE COST OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN MINNESOTA

A report authored by Child Care Aware America calculated child care affordability in every state by dividing the average cost of care by the state median income.<sup>16</sup> In 2013, the average annual cost of center-based care for an infant was \$13,993 in Minnesota. The state median annual income for a married couple was \$92,299 in the same year. Hence, **on average, a family spent 15.2% of their income to provide center-based childcare for one infant, which ranked Minnesota as the fourth least-affordable states for center-based infant care in the nation.** Similarly, the annual cost of center-based care for a 4-year-old in Minnesota was \$10,812 in 2013, placing Minnesota fifth among the top least affordable states. The cost of center-based childcare takes an even bigger portion of median household income for single parents, on average 53.7% for infant care and 41.5% for 4-year-old care.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services considers affordable child care to cost no more than 10% of annual family income. Yet, the average Minnesotan family spends 15.2% of their annual

income on center-based care per infant child. Compared to the average cost of annual mortgage payments, the cost of care for two children (one infant and one 4-year-old) is 35.7% more expensive in our state. The annual cost of center-based child care for a 4-year-old rivals that of average tuition and fees at a Minnesota public college.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, many Minnesotan families, especially lower-income ones, choose family-based care or informal care provided by friends and neighbors.

**FOOTNOTES**  
15. Reynolds, A.J., Richardson, B.A., Hayakawa, M., Lease, E.M., Warner-Richter, M., Englund, M.M., ...Sullivan, M. (2014). Association of a full-day vs part-day preschool intervention with school readiness, attendance, and parent involvement. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 312(20), 2126-2134. doi:10.1001/jama.2014.15376

16. Child Care Aware of America. (2014). *Parents and the high cost of child care*. Arlington, VA: Fraga and McCreedy.

17. According to the 2014 report published by Child Care Aware of America, the annual cost of center-based care for a 4-year-old is \$10,812 in Minnesota. Average annual tuition and fees at a public college is \$10,468 in Minnesota.

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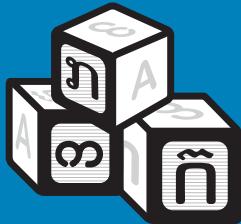
### ABOUT THE COUNCIL ON ASIAN PACIFIC MINNESOTANS

The Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans (the Council), a state agency created by the Minnesota State Legislature in 1985, advises the Governor and members of the Minnesota Legislature on issues pertaining to Asian Pacific Minnesotans, advocates on issues of importance to the Asian Pacific community, and acts as a broker between the Asian Pacific community and mainstream society. The Council serves more than 250,000 Asian and Pacific Islander Minnesotans from 40 different ethnicities.

To learn more about the Council and to read this report's data book and infographic summary, visit [mn.gov/capm](http://mn.gov/capm)

### Contact

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**COUNCIL ON ASIAN PACIFIC MINNESOTANS**  
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